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Light or Dark, Freedom or Bondage: Enhancing Book of Mormon Themes through Contrasts

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President Ezra Taft Benson taught:

There is a power in the [Book of Mormon] which will begin to flow into your lives the moment you begin a serious study of the book. You will find greater power to resist temptation. . . . You will find the power to stay on the strait and narrow path. The scriptures are called “the words of life” (see D&C 84:85), and nowhere is that more true than it is of the Book of Mormon. When you begin to hunger and thirst after those words, you will find life in greater and greater abundance. These promises—increased love and harmony in the home, greater respect between parent and child, increased spirituality and righteousness—these are not idle promises, but exactly what the Prophet Joseph Smith meant when he said the Book of Mormon will help us draw nearer to God.¹

“A serious study” of the Book of Mormon will require more than a cursory reading of the text. Indeed, in most cases, a serious study of the Book of Mormon involves analyzing the characters, sermons, doctrines, and stories in search of significant themes that the authors and editors intentionally included in the book. Once significant themes are identified, serious students of the Book of Mormon will carefully consider, weigh, and ponder these themes until principles of righteous living emerge, the application of which leads to the more abundant life that President Benson promised. In this light, a theme is like a golden thread laced through a strand of pearls, allowing each pearl to be displayed collectively in a way that enhances its beauty.

With this in mind, we should enhance our ability as religious educators as well as the ability of our students to identify and consider themes in the Book of Mormon. Themes are developed and expressed in literature through character development, stories, conflict, appeasement, and, among other things, contrasts. This article will show how a study of contrasts can enhance our understanding of major themes in the Book of Mormon, thereby enabling us to identify, analyze, apply, and present guiding principles couched in the scriptures.

In literature, contrasts are the placing of one character or scenario next to another in such a way that differences are accentuated and easily identified so the writer can teach an important principle.

One example of contrasts from the New Testament is John's placement of Nicodemus's nighttime conversation with Jesus in juxtaposition to the Samaritan woman's midday discussion with the Master at Jacob's Well. Her acceptance of Jesus brings her into the light, whereas Nicodemus's refusal to follow Jesus leaves him in darkness (see John 3–4). Other contrasts in the Old Testament are Abel and Cain (Moses 5), Abraham and Lot (Genesis 18–19), and Judah and Joseph (Genesis 38–39).

Contrasts, however, are not limited to character pairs. Not uncommonly, we find in one character's life all the elements mentioned above. The contrast is found in a "before-and-after format." For instance, Saul as a rebel against Jesus Christ and His followers prior to his experience on the road to Damascus may be profitably compared to Saul after the Lord appeared to him and in connection with his subsequent repentance and life service (see Acts 8–9). This comparison accentuates the power of the Atonement to change lives that are deeply riddled with sin. Furthermore, we can even compare entire groups of people, such as the fear-stricken armies of Israel before David slew Goliath and the courage of those same warriors after David's triumph over the giant (see 1 Samuel 17). The contrasts evidenced in each of these examples are explicit enough to serve as a charge to the reader to pursue goodness and faith and to eschew evil and fear. The greater the contrast, the clearer the choice between right and wrong, light and darkness, virtue and vice, and faith and fear.²

Contrasts are employed throughout the text of the Book of Mormon. In most cases, we cannot possibly determine whether a specific author made the comparison in the text or whether Nephi, Jacob, Mormon, or Moroni did so during the compiling and editing process. Even so, we would be ill advised to conclude, as some may be prone to do, that this literary device was unknown to Book of Mormon authors and that the appearance of contrasts in the text is the product of clever

literary analysis conducted by modern scholars. Given the use of contrasts by Old Testament authors (such as Moses) who influenced Book of Mormon authors in their style and presentation, we would be concluding erroneously that the use of contrasts in the Book of Mormon “just happened” unbeknownst to the authors and editors.³

The purposes of this article are to identify four major themes in the Book of Mormon and to explore how contrasts accentuate these themes. Specifically, we will consider (1) deep-seated discipleship, (2) the nature of true conversion through repentance, (3) the significance of standing as a witness of God by preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, and (4) the value of establishing internal and external peace among God’s people. These four themes are threaded throughout the entire Book of Mormon, and our understanding of each is heightened through the use of contrasts. Religious educators who foster their abilities to identify and work with contrasts in the Book of Mormon will be able to uncover themes and principles that, when applied, enrich our lives and naturally lend themselves to varied approaches of student participation, discovery, and application in the classroom.

Deep-Seated Discipleship: Laman, Lemuel, and Nephi

Deep-seated discipleship is a theme that runs throughout the Book of Mormon wherein we learn that, spiritually speaking, we stand or fall based upon our willingness to submit to the will of God. For example, the account of Lehi’s initial theophany is instructive. Lehi beheld the Father sitting upon His throne and Jesus Christ descending out of heaven in a cloud of light that exceeded the brightness of the sun. He was accompanied by twelve apostolic witnesses whose luster was beyond the brightness of the stars (see 1 Nephi 1:9–10). Jesus approached Lehi with a book and bade him to read. He read about many great and marvelous things, was filled with the Spirit, and was faithful and obedient to a commission to preach against the wickedness of the people of Jerusalem, even at the peril of his own life (see 1 Nephi 1:11–19; 2:1–3). His feelings were deep and poignant and moved him to righteous acts. Such is the case with every character in the Book of Mormon of spiritual consequence. Jacob, Enos, Benjamin, Alma, Mormon, Moroni, and many others all had personal spiritual experiences that led them to become deeply devoted disciples. When we look at contrast for comparison, the compilers of the Book of Mormon also chronicled the antitheses of deep-seated discipleship. This was the case with Laman and Lemuel. They serve as a contrast to Nephi, which is particularly helpful for those seeking to increase the depth of their discipleship.

We must remember that following their escape from Jerusalem, Lehi's family traveled in the wilderness to the borders of the Red Sea. After three additional days of travel,⁴ Lehi pitched his tent in a valley by the side of a river of water, built an altar, offered sacrifices to the Lord, and taught his family. Laman and Lemuel received specific instructions from their father, who challenged Laman to be like the river near their camp, "continually running into the fountain of all righteousness!" (1 Nephi 2:9). Similarly, Lemuel was admonished to be like the mighty canyon in which they had pitched their tents, "firm and steadfast, and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord!" (1 Nephi 2:10).

Nephi informs the reader that these admonitions were essential because of the stiffneckedness of Laman and Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 2:11). He then provides at least eight characteristics or actions of his older brothers to illustrate their pathway to spiritual dissension.⁵ According to Nephi, Laman and Lemuel murmured exceedingly, denied the revelations of God, placed their hearts upon their inheritance in Jerusalem, lacked faith, knew not the dealings of God, rejected the words of the prophets, were murderous, and stood confounded before the Lord (see 1 Nephi 2:11–14).

Although Laman's and Lemuel's specific responses to Lehi's exhortations are not recorded in the Book of Mormon, we are left to understand that they countered their father by rising up and uttering words against him. Despite their defiance, Lehi was so full of the Spirit that his words caused Laman's and Lemuel's "frames [to] shake before him. And he did confound them, that they durst not utter against him; wherefore, they did as he commanded them" (1 Nephi 2:14).

Here, Nephi provides the reader with a fuller character sketch of himself. This is curious when we understand the fact that he easily could have provided this introduction on the heels of the opening lines of the Book of Mormon wherein he explained that he was born of goodly parents, had seen many afflictions in his days, and was highly favored of the Lord (see 1 Nephi 1:1). The fact that he places his character sketch immediately after that of Laman and Lemuel strongly suggests an intention to compare the two portrayals. Thus readers see a clear difference between the deep-seated discipleship of Nephi and the faithless and uncommitted dispositions of Laman and Lemuel.

For example, although Laman and Lemuel "did murmur in many things" (1 Nephi 2:11), Nephi had "great desires to know of the mysteries of God" (1 Nephi 2:16). Likewise, although Laman and Lemuel found the prophecies and visions of their father to be distasteful and useless (1 Nephi 2:11), Nephi yearned for revelations from God, caus-

ing him to “cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me” (1 Nephi 2:16). Although his brothers lusted after worldly inheritances, Nephi possessed a soft heart (likely a reward for turning from worldliness). In contrast to his brothers, Nephi was not rebellious, and he testified of the Lord’s manifestations, sought the Lord diligently, was humble (see 1 Nephi 2:16–17, 19), and was trusted to be a spiritual leader and teacher over his brethren (see 1 Nephi 2:22).

The nature and importance of discipleship is a significant theme in the Book of Mormon. Nephi’s description of Laman and Lemuel’s unwillingness to strive to become deeply committed disciples is most helpful. We learn from Laman and Lemuel that murmuring, materialism, rebellion, and faithlessness lead to eventual misery. We easily determine the fruits of their decisions and therefore firmly resolve not to follow their course. The character of Nephi, on the other hand, illustrates the fundamental elements of deep-seated discipleship, such as greater desires to know the mysteries of God; the importance of fervent prayer and the receipt of personal revelation; the essentiality of a soft, pliable, and teachable heart that is open to follow the will of God; and a refusal to rebel against the Almighty. The following chart provides a concise view of Nephi’s use of contrasts. From this chart, we see the importance of deep-seated discipleship. Nephi serves as a model of ideal discipleship in 600 BC as well as today. Simply, the contrasts beckon us to follow his example of dedication to the Lord.

1 Nephi 2	
Laman and Lemuel	Nephi
1. Murmured about many things (11)	1. Had great desires to know mysteries of God (16)
2. Revelations from God were foolish (11)	2. Cried unto the Lord and was answered (16)
3. Worldly inheritance was paramount (11)	3. Possessed a soft heart (16)
4. Faithless (11)	4. Was not rebellious (16)
5. Knew not the dealings of God (12)	5. Testified of the Lord’s manifestations (17)
6. Rejected the words of prophets (13)	6. Sought the Lord diligently (19)
7. Possessed murderous dispositions (13)	7. Was humble (19)
8. Confounded before the Lord (14)	8. Was trusted to be a spiritual leader/teacher (22)

The Nature of True Conversion: Alma prior to Repentance— Alma after Repentance

A second major theme in the Book of Mormon is true conversion through repentance and trust in the Atonement of Jesus Christ. For example, Enos, who hungered after the cleansing power of the Atonement and then through fervent prayer, came to know he had been forgiven and cleansed (see Enos 1:1–5). The people of Ammon were so intent on coming to Christ that they buried their weapons of rebellion and covenanted to trust Christ and never fight again, which led Mormon to describe them as firm in the faith and willing to “suffer even unto death rather than commit sin” (Alma 24:19). At the age of fifteen, Mormon “was visited of the Lord, and tasted and knew of the goodness of Jesus” (Mormon 1:15). He possessed the spiritual stamina to remain staunchly loyal to the Almighty while all around him masses of Nephites “willfully rebelled against their God” (Mormon 1:16).

In addition to the above examples of this prominent Book of Mormon theme, the conversion of Alma the Younger provides a template for determining whether true conversion has transpired in the heart of an individual. The contrast between his life prior to conversion and his life after his repentance enhances the reader’s understanding of the importance of conversion through a mighty change of heart (see Alma 5:14).

We have no record of Alma’s childhood. We see hints that he may have been born in Helam, the colony established by his father following their flight from the Waters of Mormon (see Alma 5:5). In Helam, they were put into bondage by Amulon, one of the wicked priests of King Noah (see Mosiah 23:1–20, 32–39). Following their miraculous escape, they traveled through the wilderness to Zarahemla where the elder Alma eventually became the high priest of the Church, which was organized under the authorization of King Mosiah (see Mosiah 24:16–25; 25).⁶

At some point, Alma the Younger turned from the teachings of his father and embraced idolatry, materialism, and a lust for power. Given his unique childhood, which likely included his experiences with the privations of bondage, his witnessing miracles attendant to their release from Helam, and his father’s call to the highest office in the Church, his rebellion is even more acute. He pursued, with the four royal sons of Mosiah, a scheme to destroy the Church of God. To counter the efforts of Alma the Younger, God sent an angel to the prodigal youth. The angel’s power was so singular that his voice shook the earth, and his message moved Alma to choose a path of repentance. The ministry of Alma that followed was so great that one latter-day Apostle referred to him as “the American Paul.”⁷

In short, the dramatic epiphany associated with Alma's conversion is so rare and exceptional that President Ezra Taft Benson warned:

Becoming Christlike is a lifetime pursuit and very often involves growth and change that is slow, almost imperceptible. The scriptures record remarkable accounts of men whose lives changed dramatically, in an instant, as it were: Alma the Younger, [and] Paul on the road to Damascus. . . . Such astonishing examples of the power to change even those steeped in sin give confidence that the Atonement can reach even those deepest in despair.

But we must be cautious as we discuss these remarkable examples. Though they are real and powerful, they are the exception more than the rule. For every [Alma] . . . there are hundreds and thousands of people who find the process of repentance much more subtle, much more imperceptible. Day by day they move closer to the Lord, little realizing they are building a godlike life. They live quiet lives of goodness, service, and commitment. They are like the Lamanites, who the Lord said "were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, *and they knew it not*" (3 Nephi 9:20; emphasis added).⁸

With this caution in mind, we may plumb the text of Mosiah 27 in search of principles related to conversion that stand independently of the dramatic angelic visitation to Alma. Upon closer examination, the contrasts that emerge from the text allow us to consider *what* happened in Alma's heart (the fruits of conversion) as opposed to *how* that change was initiated (an angelic visitation). Indeed, even after the thunderous visit of the angel, we learn that Alma was brought to Christ only through repentance (see Mosiah 27:24). Additionally, Alma's repentance and deep conversion came only after he fasted and prayed for many days to know that his redemption was sure (see Alma 5:33–46). The angel was able to declare Christ to Alma, but only Alma's "repenting nigh unto death" (Mosiah 27:28) resulted in redemption (see Mosiah 27:29). So it is with us. The experience or, more likely, the experiences that bring us to the knowledge of our need for Jesus are not the saving factor—coming to Christ through repentance is. Therefore, Christ, not the angel, is the foundation upon which all lasting change rests (see Helaman 5:12; Moses 7:53). At this level of analysis, Alma's spiritual rebirth becomes a standard that may be applied by all who seek a change of heart.

This example provides at least eight clear points of contrast between Alma's character before his mighty change of heart and his disposition after he embraced the gospel of Christ. Before his conversion, Alma was an unbeliever who bitterly rejected Jesus as the Savior (see Mosiah

27:8–9); he embraced wickedness and darkness (see Mosiah 27:8, 29); as a gifted orator, he used flattery to deceive; he led many people to do iniquity; he hindered the prosperity of the Church; he stole the hearts (or manipulated the desires) of the people; he camouflaged wickedness in secrecy; and the intent of his rebellion was to destroy the Church of God (see Mosiah 27:8–11). Mormon describes the sons of Mosiah as “the very vilest of sinners” (Mosiah 28:4), and the way Alma is depicted gives us every reason to believe that he was, in every way, their peer in wickedness.

After recounting Alma’s repentance, Mormon lists at least eight contrasting characteristics or actions that are indicative of one who has experienced the cleansing power of Christ’s Atonement. For example, because of his repentance, Alma was redeemed of the Lord (see Mosiah 27:24). Instead of continuing to embrace wickedness and darkness, Alma was born of the Spirit and brought to the light (see Mosiah 27:25, 29). In the place of flattery intended to deceive, Alma used the power of language to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ (see Mosiah 27:32). Instead of leading people to do iniquity, he imparted consolation to all and confirmed the faith in the hearts and minds of all who would hear him (see Mosiah 27:33). Furthermore, he traveled extensively to build up the Church, strove zealously to repair the spiritual injuries he had caused, avoided secrecy by publishing all the things he had seen, and, finally, became an instrument in the hands of God for the rest of his life (see Mosiah 27:35–36).

The nature of true conversion through repentance and trust in the Atonement of Jesus Christ constitutes a major theme in the Book of Mormon. The comparison in this case allows the reader to understand more clearly that true conversion has not so much to do with the events surrounding conversion but with our reactions to those events. Again, the angel is not the focal point of Alma’s conversion; Christ is. In this regard, Alma serves as a pattern for all truth seekers. He came to Christ through repentance, was born of the Spirit, consecrated his talents and energies to building the Church of God, openly and publicly stood as a witness of Christ, and chose to be an instrument in the hands of God. The following chart provides an overview, accentuating the theme that true conversion does not usually necessitate fantastic visions or remarkable visitations. Rather, the contrast enhances our understanding of the principle that coming to Christ with a willing heart and a determination to trust Him matters most.

Mosiah 27	
Alma prior to Repentance	Alma after Repentance
1. Rejected Jesus in unbelief (8, 30)	1. Redeemed of the Lord through repentance (24)
2. Embraced wickedness and darkness (8, 29)	2. Born of the Spirit and brought to the light (25, 29)
3. Used language skills to flatter (8)	3. Used language skills to teach the gospel (32)
4. Led many people to iniquity (8)	4. Imparted consolation/confirmed others' faith (33))
5. Hindered prosperity of the Church (9)	5. Traveled extensively building up the Church (35))
6. Stole the hearts of the people (9)	6. Strove zealously to repair spiritual injuries (35)
7. Performed evil works in secrecy (10)	7. Published all the things he had seen (35)
8. Intended to destroy the Church (10-11)	8. Was an instrument in the hands of God (36)

Shiblon and Corianton: Standing as a Witness of God by Preaching the Gospel of Christ

A third major theme in the Book of Mormon is the importance of standing as a witness of God to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. This theme is introduced in the earliest scenes of the Book of Mormon when Lehi was commissioned to call the inhabitants of Jerusalem to repentance (see 1 Nephi 1:18–20). Indeed, Lehi's son Jacob proclaimed that failing to magnify a calling as a teacher could result in the transference of sins from those who should have been taught to the errant teacher himself (or herself; see Jacob 1:19). Like Jacob, the four sons of Mosiah stand as sentinels of the power and influence that preaching the gospel may yield (see Alma 17–26). Indeed, Alma testified that “the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else” (Alma 31:5). The prophet Ether preached until he and Coriantumr stood alone as witnesses of the complete destruction of the once noble Jaredite nation (see Ether 15). Similarly, in the closing chapters of Nephite history, Mormon taught his people that if they would repent and turn to their God, they would be spared. Tragically, the Nephites ignored Mormon's call to repentance and were visited with great destruction (see Mormon 3:2; 6:22). As these examples indicate, the importance of preaching the word of God is laced through the Book of Mormon from beginning to end.

Given the importance of this theme, we may examine with interest contrasts found in Alma 38–39. In Alma 38, Shiblon, a son of Alma, is identified as an excellent missionary who is striving to develop at least seven characteristics or actions of someone possessing great desires to preach the gospel. In Alma 39, we learn that Corianton, another of Alma’s sons, has abandoned his missionary calling to entertain the lusts of the flesh. In his character, at least seven traits or actions may be found that constitute the antithesis of effective missionary work.

Taken together, these chapters constitute a snapshot in the lives of Shiblon and Corianton, wherein they were called to preach among the Zoramites. From these chapters, we should not conclude that Shiblon is infallible or that Corianton is terminally corrupt.⁹ However, the fact that these two sons are placed side by side in the text is not accidental, leading the careful reader to search for insights into what the Lord expects from His missionaries in Alma’s day and in our own. Indeed, Alma seems to beckon latter-day readers to compare the two sons when he proclaimed to Corianton: “Have ye not observed the steadiness of thy brother, his faithfulness, and his diligence in keeping the commandments of God? Behold, has he not set a good example for thee?” (Alma 39:1).

Both Shiblon and Corianton are young men, and Alma’s individual discussions with them are intended to spur them on to righteousness throughout the rest of their lives (see Alma 38:2; 39:10). Although not perfect, Shiblon was steady, faithful, and diligent (see Alma 38:2–3); and in the face of opposition to his labors, he was patient, long-suffering, and worthy of the Lord’s companionship (see Alma 38:3–4). Shiblon had established himself as a missionary who took every opportunity to teach the word of God (see Alma 38:10). Shiblon was cautioned by his father to strive to be temperate (or moderate) in all things—to be bold but not overbearing—and to seek greater humility before the Lord, always guarding against propensities to be prideful (see Alma 38:10–12, 14). Alma further encouraged Shiblon to bridle all his passions, enabling him to focus all his energies on others and become a man who was filled with love (Alma 38:12).¹¹ Even with this instruction, however, Alma makes it clear that Shiblon was convinced of the truthfulness of the gospel and was willing to suffer imprisonment and stoning for the word’s sake (Alma 38:3–4).

In stark contrast to Shiblon, Alma provides at least seven character traits or actions of Corianton that serve as a guide for determining pitfalls that every missionary should avoid. For example, instead of undying diligence, Corianton deserted his missionary labors, traveled to the borders of the lands of the Lamanites, and pursued the harlot Isabel with whom he committed immoral acts (see Alma 39:3–5). Also, although Shiblon exhibited

the traits of steadiness, faithfulness, and diligence, Corianton failed to give heed to Alma's instruction and warnings and ignored the good example of his brother (see Alma 39:1–2). Although Shiblon was patient and long-suffering and enjoyed the companionship of the Lord (see Alma 38), Corianton boastfully relied on his own strength and wisdom without putting his trust in the Lord (see Alma 39:2). Additionally, Corianton not only forsook the ministry but also led people to do wickedly (see Alma 39:3, 13); he indulged in abominations (see Alma 39:3–5); he sought to hide his sins from God (see Alma 39:8); and he was wanton and materialistic (see Alma 39:9, 14). Corianton's most glaring deficiency as a missionary may have been his insecure and unsteady understanding of the Atonement of Christ and its significance in his personal life and in the lives of those he taught (see Alma 39:15–16). In fact, Alma 40–42 presents Alma's pointed efforts to clarify and magnify Christ's Atonement in the mind of his errant son.

Because of the prominence of missionary work as a theme in the Book of Mormon, Alma's interviews with Shiblon and Corianton are particularly instructive. Herein, Corianton contrasts with Shiblon. Although we do not delight in Corianton's failures, they do serve to enhance our understanding of the fruits of anyone who chooses to trust in the arm of flesh (see 2 Nephi 28:31). Shiblon's character, on the other hand, brings the pressing need for missionaries to strive genuinely to possess steadiness, patience, a lively testimony, temperance, humility, self-control, and love. Although neither son is perfect, the following chart accentuates the goodness of Shiblon at the time he served among the Zoramites. He stands as a model of what characteristics missionaries anciently and today should possess or should be striving to obtain.

Alma 38-39	
Shiblon (Alma 38)	Corianton (Alma 39)
1. Steady, faithful, diligent (2-3)	1. Failed to heed Alma's words (2)
2. Patient, long-suffering; the Lord was with him (3-4)	2. Boasted in his own strength and wisdom (2)
3. Teacher of the word of God (10)	3. Forsook the ministry and led people to do wickedly (3, 11-13)
4. Strove to be temperate (10)	4. Indulged in abominations (3-5)
5. Sought humility before the Lord (11)	5. Sought to hide his sins from God (8)
6. Strove to bridle passions (12)	6. Wanton and materialistic (9, 14)
7. Sought to be full of love (12)	7. Unsure of the Atonement of Christ (15-16)

4 Nephi: The Establishment and Collapse of Peace

The fourth major theme of the Book of Mormon that we will explore is the importance of establishing peace within our own hearts (what will be referred to as *internal peace*) and within the general society in which we work, worship, and live (referred to as *external peace*). Nephi explained that giving way to temptations from the adversary destroyed his peace (see 2 Nephi 4:27). Also, for some time prior to Korihor's ministry as an antichrist, the people of Zarahemla had established continual peace through their humility, fasting, prayer, and obedience to the commandments (see Alma 30:2–3). Without question, Korihor was the tool in Satan's hands to disrupt this peace. Furthermore, the so-called "war chapters" of the Book of Mormon report one instance after another of the establishment or collapse of peace. Mormon reports that all of Captain Moroni's efforts were designed to foster peace in the nation, Church, home, and heart. Such conditions, he explained, made it possible to "live unto the Lord" (Alma 48:10). On the other hand, Amalickiah was bent on stirring up contention and strife to the point of hardening hearts and blinding minds in order to fulfill his fraudulent plans to destroy the peace of the Nephites and place them in bondage (see Alma 48:1–7).

Possibly, the best illustration of this theme in the Book of Mormon is found in 4 Nephi. Following the personal ministry of the Savior in the Americas, peace was established in the nation, in the Church, and in the hearts of the people. Interestingly, perhaps the best case study of the demise of internal and external peace is also found in 4 Nephi, a decline that transpired after two hundred years of peace, unity, and consecration.

The establishment and collapse of peace in 4 Nephi are accentuated through deliberate contrasts. An examination of the forty-nine verses that comprise 4 Nephi reveals at least ten clear points of contrast between the actions of the people of Nephi, who established and maintained peace, and the people of the fourth generation, who turned away from God and caused the collapse of continual peace. The first third of the book describes the people of Nephi who become converted to the Lord (see 4 Nephi 1:2) and experience no contentions among themselves (see 4 Nephi 1:2, 13, 15, 18). Also, they have sufficient for their needs because there are no rich or poor in their midst. Furthermore, the gifts of the Spirit are abundantly manifest in their lives (see 4 Nephi 1:3–5). During this time, there are no whoredoms committed, honesty prevails in all circumstances, and all cherish and have a deep respect for life. Finally, the people of Nephi enjoy singular happiness

(see 4 Nephi 1:16), the result of which is a spiritual understanding that they have been redeemed by Christ and are joint heirs with Him in the kingdom of the Father (see 4 Nephi 1:17).

Today, we take great hope in the fact that Nephi's people persisted in harmony for some two hundred years. We are, however, sobered by the fact that this idyllic society collapsed in a very short period of time. Mormon's documentation of its end is found primarily in the last two-thirds of 4 Nephi. Unfortunately, the ruin of this community began when a small part of the people rebelled, broke away, and disassociated themselves from the people of God. Where there was once unity and all were converted, there now appeared groups of dissidents who took upon themselves the names of Laman, Jacob, Joseph, and Zoram, becoming all manner of "ites" (see 4 Nephi 1:20, 35–36). Where once pride was virtually nonexistent, it became apparent by the wearing of costly apparel, jewels, and the "fine things of the world" (see 4 Nephi 1:24). At the height of their peace, all things were held in common among the people of God, which nullified the possibility of poverty. However, by the end of 4 Nephi, a group of people refused to live the law of consecration and, in its place, established a class structure wherein status was determined by a person's personal wealth. The downward spiral continued, as many people denied the legitimacy of the true Church (see 4 Nephi 1:25–26) and persecuted those who chose to remain faithful (see 4 Nephi 1:34). Where once the people were righteous and would not allow whoredoms in their midst, they dwindled in unbelief, became hard-hearted, established many churches that were led by false prophets, and were swept away in iniquitous acts (see 4 Nephi 1:34). Significantly, Mormon explains that their rebellions were willfully carried out with a clear understanding of their consequences (see 4 Nephi 1:38). Furthermore, the ancestors of these people had maintained a deep respect for life, but the children of the rebels were taught to hate the people of God. Secret combinations were established and encouraged, allowing the robbers of Gadianton to spread throughout the land (see 4 Nephi 1:39–40, 42, 46). In the end, the more wicked part of the people increased in strength and became exceedingly more numerous than the believers in Christ (see 4 Nephi 1:40). Indeed, conditions became so desperate that the prophet Ammaron was constrained by the Holy Ghost to bury the sacred records in the hill Shim (see 4 Nephi 1:48; Mormon 1:3).

Mormon's economy with words in the book of 4 Nephi are remarkable. He uses nineteen verses to describe a righteous community of Saints that persisted in peace for two centuries. Without question, this was the

golden age of all Book of Mormon peoples. Although we cannot be certain, it is reasonable to conclude that in a coming day, we will possess a fuller record of this significant era of Book of Mormon history. In the meantime, it is apparent that Mormon is very interested in helping latter-day readers come to an understanding of what qualities and characteristics serve to constitute conditions of peace internally and externally and what vices bring an end to such peace. The following chart reconstructs the contrasts that Mormon embedded in the text of 4 Nephi. Here we see that conversion, kindness, consecration, gifts of the Spirit, love, virtue, honesty, respect, joy, and a perfect brightness of hope in Christ's redemption are salient elements of a peaceful society. At the same time, we learn that pride, class structure based on temporal possessions, unbelief, rebellion, hatred, secrecy, and corruption are elements that bring the smooth-running wheels of a peaceful society to a grinding halt. Because Mormon utilizes contrasts in 4 Nephi, our understanding of the significance, goodness, and desirability of internal and external peace in our lives is enhanced. In this regard, 4 Nephi serves as another compelling example of the effectiveness of contrasts that accentuate the importance of a major theme in the Book of Mormon.

4 Nephi 1	
Establishing Internal/External Peace	The Collapse of Internal/External Peace
1. All converted to the Lord (2)	1. Small part of people revolt (20, 35-36)
2. No contentions among them (2)	2. Some lifted up in pride (24)
3. No rich or poor: consecration (3)	3. Consecration ends; class structure set up (25-26)
4. Gifts of the Spirit in abundance (3-5)	4. They deny the true Church (26)
5. Love of God in hearts of people (15)	5. They persecute the true Church of Christ (29)
6. No whoredoms among the people (16)	6. They dwindle in unbelief and become wicked (34)
7. Honest dealings prevail (16)	7. They willfully rebel (38)
8. Deep respect for life (16)	8. Children taught to hate the people of God (39)
9. A happier people was never created by God (16)	9. Secret oaths and combinations established firmly among the people (40, 42)
10. Children of Christ, heirs of the kingdom of God (17)	10. The robbers of Gadianton spread over the land, leaving no righteous among them (46)

Conclusion

From the text, we can assuredly conclude that the authors of the Book of Mormon employed contrasts to teach and highlight important principles of the gospel. In this article, we have examined four major themes of the Book of Mormon in which contrasts were used to enhance our understanding and appreciation of the principles and doctrines found therein. From these, we have come to a clearer understanding of the true nature of discipleship, the essential role that repentance and trust in the Atonement play in our coming to Christ, the foundational characteristics of an effective missionary, and the qualities resident in the heart of one who seeks to enjoy internal and external peace in this life. Each of these contrasts could be overlooked easily if a reader experiences only a superficial reading of the text. In this light, it is hoped that examination of these contrasts may result in a more careful study of the Book of Mormon by its readers and improved abilities on their part to identify, analyze, apply, and present gospel principles that are couched in the scriptures. ■

Notes

1. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 54; emphasis added.

2. The use of contrasts in the Old and New Testaments is the subject of many articles and chapters published over the past several decades. A small sampling of titles is included here for additional readings: Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (1984), 54–55; see also Judah Goldin, “The Youngest Son, Or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96, no. 1 (1977), 27–44; James A. Diamond, “Jacob vs. the Married Harlot: Intertextual Foils in the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (October 2000), 1–25; Norman J. Cohen, “The Two That Are One—Sibling Rivalry in Genesis,” *Judaism* 32 (Summer 1983), 331–42; Mark F. Whitters, “Discipleship in John: Four Profiles,” *Word and World* 18, no. 4 (1998), 422–27; Tom Thatcher, “Jesus, Judas, and Peter: Character by Contrast in the Fourth Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (October–December 1996), 435–48.

3. Concerning the care taken by Book of Mormon authors and editors, President Ezra Taft Benson explained: “Mormon wrote near the end of the Nephite civilization. Under the inspiration of God, who sees all things from the beginning, he abridged centuries of records, choosing the stories, speeches, and events that would be most helpful to us. . . . If they saw our day, and chose those things which would be of greatest worth to us, is not that how we should study the Book of Mormon? We should constantly ask ourselves, ‘Why did the Lord inspire Mormon (or Moroni or Alma) to include that in his record? What lesson can I learn from that to help me live in this day and age?’” (“The Keystone of Our Religion,”

Ensign, January 1992, 5).

See also Gerald N. Lund, “An Anti-Christ in the Book of Mormon—The Face May Be Strange, but the Voice Is Familiar,” in *The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 105–28. For additional examples of how Old Testament authors influenced Book of Mormon authors and editors, see S. Kent Brown, “The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 75–98; John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10, no. 1 (Autumn 1969), 69–84; James T. Duke, “Word Pairs and Distinctive Combinations in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 2 (2003), 32–41; David Bokovoy, “From Distance to Proximity: A Poetic Function of Enallage in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 1 (2000), 60–63; Steven David Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes, “Colophons,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 210.

4. See D. Kelly Ogden, “Answering the Lord’s Call,” in *Studies in Scripture, vol. 8: Alma 30 to Moroni*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 23, 26.

5. Although I suggest eight points of comparison, this outcome is by no means comprehensive. Indeed, a different reading may yield six or ten points of comparison between Nephi and Laman and Lemuel. Furthermore, I am not striving to attain an exact “side-by-side” comparison of each point. Another reader may identify eight characteristics of Laman’s and Lemuel’s faithlessness and ten characteristics of Nephi’s discipleship. Simply put, this is a somewhat subjective undertaking. Ultimately, the fact that the text of the Book of Mormon beckons the reader to examine the comparison is the most important point. These contrasts could be “charted” in many ways, and the reader is at liberty to employ a great deal of variety in the endeavor. This is the case with the other three themes that are illustrated through contrasts in this article. My charting of the contrasts is intended to aid the reader but is not intended to suggest comprehensiveness.

6. See S. Kent Brown, “Alma²,” in Largey, *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 36–37.

7. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 268.

8. “A Mighty Change of Heart,” *Ensign*, October 1989, 5.

9. Indeed, the text clearly shows that Shiblon remains faithful throughout his life and that Corianton repents, returns to his ministry, and endures to the end in righteousness (see Alma 43:1–2; 49:30; 63:1, 10–11).

10. See Richard O. Cowan, “Shiblon,” in Largey, *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 721. The author also credits Jared M. Halverson for providing valuable insights regarding the character and personality of Shiblon.

Appendix: Additional Contrasts in the Book of Mormon

Jacob and Sherem

Sherem is the first “anti-Christ” depicted in the Book of Mormon. Jacob is the first prophet to face such an opponent of the Church. Placed side by side, the differences between Sherem and the Lord’s prophet are telling.

Jacob 7	
Jacob (Jacob 7)	Sherem (Jacob 7)
1. Beheld angels and heard voice of the Lord (5)	1. Deceived by the devil (18)
2. Received many revelations from God (5)	2. Revelations are not possible (7)
3. Spiritually grounded (5, 8, 12)	3. Intellectually learned, spiritually weak (4)
4. Unshakable (5)	4. Fearful (19)
5. Preached Christ (6)	5. Denied Christ (2)
6. Unwilling to tempt God (14)	6. Sign seeker (13)

Zarahemla, Gideon, and Ammonihah

In the initial chapters of the book of Alma, Alma preaches in Zarahemla, Gideon, and Ammonihah.¹ Alma provides a description of the people living in these cities. Interestingly, in Zarahemla Alma preached about the importance of maintaining or reclaiming the basic tenets of testimony. In Gideon Alma taught deep doctrinal truths about the Atonement of Jesus Christ. In Ammonihah Alma preached impending doom and destruction if the people of the city failed to repent. When Alma’s description of these cities is placed side by side, it becomes evident that he determined what to teach by considering the spiritual condition of his audience. In this regard, Zarahemla and Ammonihah are contrasts to Gideon whose inhabitants serve as a model for individuals, families, and congregations who desire to be taught deep spiritual truths by God’s prophets.

Alma 5, 7, 8		
Zarahemla (Alma 5)	Gideon (Alma 7)	Ammonihah (Alma 8)
1. Iniquitous (37)	1. Humble (3)	1. Hardhearted (9, 11)
2. Puffed up (37)	2. Prayerful (3)	2. Rejected prophet (9, 13)
3. Gone astray (37)	3. Blameless (3)	3. Disaffected from Church (11)
4. Must repent (50-51)	4. Believers (6)	4. Gospel is a foolish tradition (11)
5. Steadily wicked (53-56)	5. Worshiped God only (6)	5. Waxed gross in iniquities (17, 28)

Amalickiah and Captain Moroni

Leadership, and the qualities of righteous leaders, constitutes a significant theme in the Book of Mormon. This can be easily seen in the contrasts between Amalickiah and Captain Moroni in the text.²

Alma 47-48	
Amalickiah (Alma 47-48)	Captain Moroni (Alma 48)
1. Was a subtle man to do evil (Alma 47:4)	1. Prepared his people in faithfulness and made weak things strong (7, 9)
2. Obtained power by fraud (Alma 48:7, 16, 30, 33, 35)	2. Promoted liberty, family, Christianity (10, 13, 16)
3. Was murderous and bloodthirsty (Alma 47:18)	3. Did not delight in bloodshed (11)
4. Blinded minds (Alma 48:3)	4. Was a man of perfect understanding (11)
5. Hardened hearts (Alma 48:3)	5. Heart swelled with thanksgiving (12)
6. Stirred people to anger (Alma 48:3)	6. Labored exceedingly for welfare of people (12)
7. Promoted wicked people (Alma 48:5)	7. Was firm in the faith of Christ (12, 17)

Notes

1. Alma also preached and had success in Melek. However, no details are provided beyond the fact that many people in and around Melek flocked to Alma, were taught by him, and were baptized (see Alma 8:4–5).

2. This contrast is the subject of a memorable address delivered by Hugh Nibley at the commencement services held at Brigham Young University on August 19, 1983 (see Hugh Nibley, “Leadership versus Management,” *BYU Today*, February 1984, 17–19, 45–46).